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The National Portrait Gallery Collection

By Colin Ford

The National Portrait Gallery was founded in 1856, when photography was already seventeen years old. Empowered to acquire "likenesses of persons eminent in British history", it might have been expected to embrace the new medium eagerly. Instead, it restricted itself to painting, sculpture, drawing and such traditional media. Why?

The Gallery's first trustees (among them Carlyle, who thought a portrait "a small light candle by which the Biographies could be for the first time be read, and same human interpretation be made of them") undoubtedly perceived the shortcomings of early photographic portraits. Many photographers were businessmen first, artists a poor second. Richard Beard, for instance, who established London's first portrait studio, was a coal merchant who bought a dog-eared type licence strictly as a business proposition. Ironically, it was to make him bankrupt. And the available technology was limited. Mary Edgeworth, subject of the oldest portrait photograph in the Gallery, described visiting Beard's studio: "It is a wonderful mysterious operation, the whole apparatus and stood on a high platform under a glass dome casting a snappy blue light making all look like spectres..."

No wonder only the very strongest personalities succeed in looking human in photographs of the period, and even they seem stern and humorless. They could scarcely smile when opening a giant brass lens protruding from a vast wooden camera. Take two famous examples. Alfred, Lord Tennyson and his friend W. H. Brookfield were,

according to contemporary accounts, always joking, keeping each other in fits of laughter. One searches their earliest photographs in vain for any hint of this.

As late as 1926, Roger Fry was moved to write: "One day we may hope that the National Portrait Gallery will be deprived of so large a part of its grant that it will turn to fostering the art of photography and will rely on its results for its records instead of buying acres of canvas covered at great expense by fashionable practitioners in paint". By then, the imperfect and slow chemistry of the early days had been superseded and "instantaneous" photography, even colour, was possible. Yet the National Portrait Gallery had only taken one nervous step towards the medium, starting in 1917 its "National Photographic Record", an archive of famous faces taken by a London studio portraitist.

Fry's plea came in his introduction to a book of Victorian portraits by the photographer he considered artistically the most distinguished, Julia Margaret Cameron. A friend and neighbour of Tennyson, she was encouraged to take up photography as a hobby in 1863 and was soon producing the most penetrating portraits of the poet laureate and other famous men and women. To whom he introduced her. Though some found their way into the Gallery's reference archives over the years, it was not until 1972, when the Gallery finally took Fry's advice and established a Department of Film and Photography, that her work entered the primary collection. Beside portraits in the older media, a priceless album of her best work, assembled for Sir John Herchel, was sold at auction for its world record price of £52,000, its

purchaser was refused an expert licence (the first time this had happened with photographs) and the Gallery raised the purchase price by public appeal (the first and, so far, only time historic photographs have been the subject of such an appeal anywhere in the world).

The "Herschel Album" joined three albums of engravings in the Gallery by two even earlier masters, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. These, too, had been purchased at what was a world record in 1974, £32,178.50p. As Adamson later pointed out, this was the first time anywhere in the world that photographs had been counted among national art treasures.

Since these priceless acquisitions, the National Portrait Gallery has mounted a score or so of photographic exhibitions and published almost as many catalogues. Attendance and sales have been high and the kind of photographic, historic and contemporary, seems to attract immediate chords of recognition with those who are as uncomfortable when confronted with "fine art" photography as they are with paintings. They recognize portraits: after all, most of them take them and collect them.

In a way, the most significant exhibition continuing photography was planned before the Department of Film and Photography even came into being. The *Masque of Beauty* (1972) was an exhibition which explored female beauty through the ages and came to focus on more than a motley number of photographs to be infiltrated among the paintings and engravings, but they were a popular and successful element. Surprisingly, none of the artists, and none of the public (at least within hearing) questioned the propriety of showing photographs alongside the other portraits. It was taken for granted that this was their rightful place.



Karin Horney, the psychoanalyst, photographed by Lotte Jacsó New York, 1947.

Animal vegetables

By Aaron Schari

Edward Weston: His Life and Photographs
299pp. Phaidon: Aperture. £14.95, 0 89 181 043 6

Edward Weston's reputation is largely based on his photographs of peppers, shells, bones, human figures, pumpkins, and other objects which, in his hands, convey a feeling for life. His nude and portraits also establish him as one of America's great photographers.

Weston took an estimated 4,000-6,000 photographs in his fifty-year career. Of these, the 158 facsimile plates in the splendidly produced *Edward Weston: His Life and Photographs* form a cross-section of his work. All were originally conceptions to enlarge and the direct result of his artistic instincts.

The poetic story of Weston's life is told with sensitivity by Ilen Maddow. Vulnerable though he was, Weston's clear vision of life and art poured out to his friends and family (the *Westons*). His intimate thoughts about his art and about his huge appetite for sex are found in this book.

Weston's writings are also perceptive about the troubled world outside. He reveals his hatred for war, for big cities, for the automobile. He found American middle-class sexual puritanism equally repugnant, and did much in his own life to confound it.

In 1923 Weston moved from Los Angeles to Mexico where he stayed for four years. It was a crucial phase in his career. He became acquainted with the muralists Orozco, Rivera and their friends. They also appreciated his pictures of the painted fopodas of polichinos, the still, silent, surreal corners of the painted village life of unpopulated (but for a few hours) because of the long exposure times required for

his 8 by 10 plates. His Mexican days, not unlike that of Tchaikovsky in the South Seas (but far less romantic) may also be an escape from civilization.

My dissent for that impossible village of Los Angeles' grand daily, three Mr. Mexicos, revolution, smallpox, poverty, anything but the place of America - Los Angeles. To think that Mexico had to abandon the fair country of California to such a fate.

In Mexico, Weston was stunned by the faces he saw. Only the Indians, he said, could have created some of them. Others from the blind, "in cruel, so savage, so capable of any crime". His Mexican portraits fill the frames, an extraneous matter is allowed to detract from the majesty of the heads; he achieves a total concentration on the subject, without reinforcing the image with contrived composition. The purity of vision became the hallmark of his work.

In use of the camera which now had become so responsive to his desires, that his work achieved a genuine spontaneity. In Weston's own words: "In the application of camera principles, thought and action on nearly coincide that the conception of an idea and its execution can almost be simultaneous."

His singular close-ups of fruit and vegetables were not a search for the object's expressive qualities, but a hard, factual realism "for rendering the very substance and quietness of the thing itself". Few of Weston's photographs are intended as metaphors of the subject. Nor was it his intention to dwell on their strangeness. Instead, they evoke a matter-of-fact dignity, the

Fred Meyer's photographs - which with brief texts by Peter Hebblethwaite, Peter Nichols and others make up *The Vatican: Portrait of a State and Community* (226pp. Gill and Macmillan, £18, 0 7171 1083 4) - have as their background the magnificent buildings and prospects of the Vatican City. The main subjects, however, are the people who work in or are drawn to the walls of the oratory. Here are the holiday-makers and the pilgrims, nun-masters and the telephone exchange, more guards repairing a bank of television monitors, quiet-looking, and

beauty intrinsic in their muted and form.

Weston first experimented with this style in 1925 when, in Mexico, an ordinary laundry bowl, a "gay enameled receptacle of common daily beauty", inspired him with its "beauty". His response to that beauty was not unlike the response to his photographs of nudes. He denied that any such symbolism was intended - though it is hard to believe that such a photograph as Weston could study the rectangle of ground glass and any reference to sex.

A temporary diversion in 1931 to photography occurred in 1931 to the death of the Depression he was recruited into the PWA (Public Works of Art Project) to contribute to a photographic record called "The American Scene", a forerunner of the famous Farm Security Administration photographs. Weston's documentary did not suit Weston's temperament, and the photographs he took for the project do not appear in Maddow's book.

Weston left the PWA project after about four months and returned to his retreat in Carmel in Northern California where he remained until his death in 1958. There, on the wild coast at Point Lobos, he took some of his finest photographic close-ups. Even when Weston steps back and surveys a landscape of barren rocks and gorges, scarred earth or sand dunes, stretching into the distance, he raised horizon line for sky. The effect, as in his convergent view of succulents, sea weed, weathered trunks and gnarled roots, is one of standing over the subject, embracing it, and breathing life into every intimate detail.

priests at work in the Vatican's secret archives. Everywhere there are theocrats running this great pomp of services to Saint Peter's, and various public appearances of the Pope - Paul VI climbing his Papal skullcap on a windy day and an impressive shot of him at night being carried through a adoring crowd in a palanquin. Cordell Freeman and Bishop John Meckoy are caught off duty by the many shots of the new Pope (a palanquin) or smoking cardinals.

Documents of the English lowlands

By Ronald Blythe

NANCY NEWHALL:
P. H. Emerson: The Fight for Photography as a Fine Art
266pp. Phaidon: Aperture. £16.95, 0 91234 58 4

The name P. H. Emerson drifts around in East Anglian subconscience in a still quite unworldly way. "Yarmouth from Breydon Water", "Women Raking", "Towing the Reed" and especially "Coming Home from the Marshes" have acquired the icon-like properties of pictures in search of a soul. The late Nancy Newhall, whose major work was this biography of the great and strange nineteenth-century photographer, says Emerson's interpretation in words and images of what she calls "the Netherlands of England" is worthy to stand beside Auguste's Paris, the geological surveys of the American West and the Farm Security Administration's America in the 1930s.

She sees him as the first true photographer-poet. Arriving as he did on a frenetic photography scene in which so many talents were striving for artistic reputations on a par with those of painters and engravers, it could not have been a better moment for a young man with his cankerous mixture of puritanism and romanticism. He was, in fact, a poet in his own right. He was twenty-seven, a qualified doctor of medicine, a New Englander as well as English (American law allowed him this duality), married, a novelist, tall, fair and stylish. Together with these assets - and that of being the cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson - he had the good fortune to find in Norfolk and Suffolk, on a first visit, his special territory of the imagination. This was in August 1883 when he first saw Southwold and Great Yarmouth.

It had all begun in Rome, where

the Puritan, agnostic and anatomist in him were each profoundly shocked by Italian art. With a naturalistic philosophy curiously similar to that expounded by Comenius in his lectures, Emerson at once set about finding his own truth-to-nature creative responses, particularly with respect to human beings rooted in a landscape. The year before he found both his people and his place on the East Anglian coast, he had bought his first camera, and it was the revelation he received through its ground glass which gave him what Nancy Newhall calls the "Netherlands of England". This intensification of the view in the lens was to remain for him the camera's ultimate glory, more marvellous than any print. He agreed with his East Anglian "peasants" when he allowed them to put their heads under his focusing cloth and they caught their breath with delight at a brilliance which they had never before encountered, and said, "Ah, if we could only get it like that!" Like, they meant.

Emerson had some lessons in photography, not from a photographer but from his old tutor in physics and chemistry at Cambridge. Or the whole, though, he served no apprenticeship. He was one of those artists who need only the merest outline of instruction. Julia Margaret Cameron, of course, was another. Presented by her daughter and son-in-law with a lens and camera - "It is my own, you know, Mother, in try to photograph" - she turned her cell into a dark-room and a glazed luncheon into her glass-room and began to take pictures. Emerson revered her and his account of her work, included here, is fascinating. Although only half the age she was when she began her work, he was for a while equally unskilled and single-minded. He gave up medicine, brought his family to Southwold, found a local artist and naturalist (T. P. Gifford) to guide

him about the region and began work at once on the great series of pictures which were to fill *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads, Pictures of Life in Ficht and Fen* (sic) of the Norfolk Broads. Pictures of East Anglian Life and 19th Life on a Tidal Water.

These remarkable albums were received with every kind of hostility and criticism, and with some awe. The new photographic establishment, with its proliferating journals and medals and its attempts to place itself as an equal among the traditional arts, saw all that it preached and practised threatened by what Emerson called his Naturalistic Photography. Primarily, what the photographic society and its ac-

demies objected to in Emerson was his "differential focusing", as he himself called it. He said: "The principal object in the picture must be fairly sharp, just as sharp as the eye sees it and no sharper, but everything else, and all other planes of the picture must be subdued... slightly out of focus, not to the extent of producing destruction of structure, or fuzziness, but sufficient to keep them back and in place."

But it is in another statement that Emerson sums up the genius of these entrancing work-photographs of men and women labouring in and around the Broads a hundred years ago: "Nothing in nature has a hard outline, but everything is seen against something else, often so subtly that you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. In this mingled decision and indecision lies all the charm and mystery of nature."

Nancy Newhall backs her long, detailed and utterly absorbing portrait of the conflictingly high-handed and humble Emerson with a witty account of the late nineteenth-century photographic world. She concentrates on such figures as O. G. Rejlander, Alfred Stieglitz and, most of all, on the unrecruited

king of English pictorial photography, Emerson's hero, Henry Peach Robinson, whose most medalled photograph in the world, Robinson had begun as a painter. Turning to the camera and adapting the techniques of genre-painting to it, he became enormously successful. "Any dodge, trick and conjuration of any kind is open to the photographer's use..." It is his imperative duty to avoid the mean, the bare, the ugly, and to aim to elevate his subject, to avoid awkward forms, and to correct the unpleasing aspects of his subject. He is advised, and streamlined, says Nancy Newhall, Robinson's ideas and devices are overwhelmingly still with us.

The wealthy Emerson, christened Pedro Enrique on his father's Cuban sugar estate, was on far from this skillfully manipulated and profitable photographic scene as anyone could be. But he was a man with a message who had a taste for dissent and even for a quarrel. He attacked the Robinson school and it reviled him. In the long course of this row, splendidly documented here, all the confused business about art-and-photography comes to the surface. Although he stirred it up and kept it on the boil for nearly twenty years, Emerson was never deeply upset by the battle. It allowed him to exercise a far from offensive high-and-mightiness and it drew him close to the subject of his controversial vision, the half-marine, half-agricultural society and its watery acres.

Having no other criterion in which to judge such a triumph, those who admired his work talked of artists such as Camille and Millet. The East Anglian press was in no doubt about what he was getting at and its columns were filled with Tory rage by his exposure - in captions and essays, as well as photographs - of the miserable conditions in which the poor lived. Emerson, unlike the genre-photographers who combed the alleys and seafarers for beauti-

ful or striking faces, published his studies of a coastal people in order that they "would help in the understanding of this peculiar region and add to the outcry against abuses". He set down the local dialect and made himself familiar with all the local crafts and customs. And as a doctor, he was expert in gauging standards of health and welfare in the district. His albums, though among the finest aesthetic achievements of the camera, are also early sociological documents. In Nancy Newhall's words, they were to make him "a prophet crying in a strange, dry, mechanised and mercantile wilderness".

In 1891 he gave it all up. In a letter sent to every photographic magazine he said that "the medium must rank the lowest of all arts". In short, the photograph is a very limited art. I regret deeply that I have come to this conclusion. There was no overwhelming private grief in this repudiation. Emerson had tired of hobbies, tired of houses and places, tired even, it seems, of what he so uniquely was, an artist of the ground glass. He lived on until 1936, still taking some pictures. But the high period of his achievement was to be the 1880s. The second half of this lovely book consists of a sheer sheet of pictures from those now familiar bulks and features of his "peasants", all taken on a grey day "when possible"; the wharves "which Old Cromer painted in some of his pictures"; and the toll and cold. The beauty and strength of it all, such as would have naturally existed in such labour and in such a countryside.

Lewis Carroll - *Victorian photographer* (Introduction by Helmut Gernsheim) 93pp, 41 plates. Thames and Hudson, £4.95, 0 500 27171 2

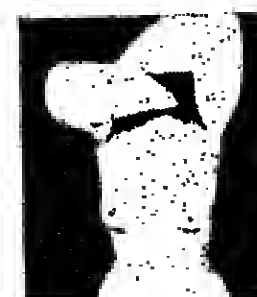
Reverend Charles Dodgson's photographs of young girls, mainly from albums in the Gernsheim collection, University of Texas.

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